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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.

THE ROLE OF THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER IN COUNTERINSURGENCY

by

Patricia J. Bushway

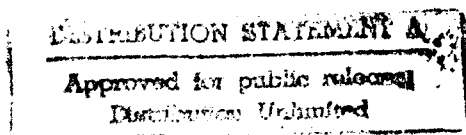
Major, US Army

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: Patricia J. Bushway

17 June 1993



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## REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1a REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION <b>UNCLASSIFIED</b>		1b RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS	
1 SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY		3 DISTRIBUTION AVAILABILITY OF REPORT DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A; APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.	
2b DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE		5 MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)	
4 PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)		7a NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION	
6a NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION <b>OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT</b>	6b OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable) <b>C</b>	7b ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)	
6c ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) <b>NAVAL WAR COLLEGE NEWPORT, R.I. 02841</b>		9 PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER	
8a NAME OF FUNDING/SPONSORING ORGANIZATION	8b OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable)	10 SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS	
8c ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)		PROGRAM ELEMENT NO	PROJECT NO
		TASK NO	WORK UNIT ACCESSION NO
11 TITLE (Include Security Classification) <b>THE ROLE OF THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER IN COUNTERINSURGENCY (U)</b>			
12 PERSONAL AUTHOR(S) <b>BUSHWAY, PATRICIA J. MAJOR, US ARMY</b>			
1a TYPE OF REPORT <b>FINAL</b>	13b TIME COVERED FROM TO	14 DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day) <b>17 JUNE 1993</b>	15 PAGE COUNT <b>46</b>
16 SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.			
17 COSATI CODES		18 SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)	
FIELD	GROUP	COUNTERINSURGENCY, OPERATIONAL COMMANDER	
		EL SALVADOR, DHOFAR	
19 ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number) In today's changing international environment, counterinsurgency in support of an ally or to encourage regional stability is an important mission for the US military. The operational commander will face the task of translating the strategic goals of that mission into the tactical actions that will accomplish those national goals. In preparing to conduct counterinsurgency operations, the operational commander must consider the cultural, military, and political aspects of the conflict. Two of the more successful operations that could provide guidance in the preparation are the experience of the British Army in Dhofar from 1965-1975, and the experience of the US military in El Salvador from 1975-1985. Both provide valuable examples of techniques and procedures that proved successful, and could be applied to future counterinsurgency operations.			
20 DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS		21 ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION <b>UNCLASSIFIED</b>	
22a NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL <b>CHAIRMAN, OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT</b>		22b TELEPHONE (Include Area Code) <b>841-3414</b>	22c OFFICE SYMBOL <b>C</b>

Abstract of

THE ROLE OF THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER IN COUNTERINSURGENCY

In today's changing international environment, counterinsurgency in support of an ally or to support regional stability is an important mission for the US military. The operational commander will face the task of translating the strategic goals of that mission into the tactical actions that will achieve those national, strategic goals.

In preparing to conduct counterinsurgency operations, the operational commander can find numerous examples of that type of operation in history. Two of the more successful operations that could provide guidance are the experience of the British Army in Dhofar from 1965-1975, and the experience of the US military in El Salvador from 1975-1985.

In both cases, the factors contributing to the success of the supporting nations, Great Britain and the US, fall into three categories: cultural, military, and political. The three categories provide a framework for the operational commander to analyze the problem, determine appropriate courses of action, and prepare the most effective force structure for the mission. Dhofar and El Salvador also provide valuable examples of techniques and procedures that proved successful, and could be applied to future counterinsurgency operations.

In conclusion, the operational commander will be a key player in future counterinsurgency operations. His role as the link between the strategic and tactical levels is essential in accomplishing the mission in a manner that remains consistent with US interests.

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## CHAPTER I: Introduction

Insurgency and counterinsurgency are not new problems. Developed and developing nations have been struggling with them for many years, and are likely to do so in the future. As long as there are ideological differences and economic and social imbalances in the world, the conditions which give rise to an insurgency will exist, and counterinsurgency will follow.

Counterinsurgency, as defined by JCS Pub 1-02, is "those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency."<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of the operational commander, counterinsurgency may not be his primary mission, and it may not be the mission for which he is best prepared, but it is one that cannot be ignored. "The role of the CINC is critical. His regional perspective is at the operational level of the conflict. In conjunction and coordination with the country teams, the CINC identifies and applies military and certain humanitarian and civic action resources to achieve US goals. With proper and timely employment, these resources minimize the likelihood for need of US combat involvement."<sup>2</sup>

Two factors can complicate the task of applying resources effectively while preventing escalation and threatening the involvement of US combat forces. First, in the total experiences that a nation and its military forces draw on in developing military policy and doctrine, counterinsurgency experience is probably relatively limited and may not be overwhelmingly positive. Military and political involvement in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation is often controversial in both the nation providing assistance and in the host nation receiving assistance. In the two cases examined in this paper, there was some reluctance and confusion in the

supported and supporting nations about the role of the supporting nation's military in the internal struggle of the supported nation. While the assistance is provided at the request of the country battling the insurgency, the details of providing the assistance can lead to disagreements.

Secondly, in looking at previous counterinsurgencies for guidance in dealing with them in the future, the most striking characteristic is the dissimilarity between insurgencies. Insurgencies can exist all over the world, targets can be military, political, social or economic, and the insurgents objectives can range from forcing change within the existing regime to the complete overthrow of the regime. In view of the vagueness and despite progress in the development of doctrine and force structure for counterinsurgency, the operational commander may still be left looking for strategy and tactics that have a reasonable chance of success.

Fortunately, the operational commander does have some information to guide his development of a counterinsurgency plan. There are historic common guidelines that have been effective in past counterinsurgency operations, but they are broad in scope, and apply more at the strategic than the operational level. These common guidelines are: 1) conduct a comprehensive appraisal of the situation in the threatened country; 2) identify measures to address the causes of discontent in the threatened country; 3) develop effective military and police capabilities in the threatened country; and 4) mobilize all aspects of national power to support the counterinsurgency operation.<sup>3</sup>

The focus of the operational commander must be narrowed without losing sight of those guidelines that may influence strategic policy and objectives. The question addressed here is whether or not there are similar guidelines for the operational commander as the translator of strategic aims into tactical operations. Can two relatively successful counterinsurgency

operations in different parts of the world provide the operational commander with lessons learned for the planning and execution of future counterinsurgency operations? The two operations, the British experience in Dhofar from 1965 to 1975, and the US experience in El Salvador from 1975 to 1985, are worthy of examination for insights in planning for and conducting future counterinsurgencies.



## CHAPTER II: Dhofar

Dhofar is the southern province of Oman. It is bounded in the west by Yemen, in the north by the "Empty Quarter" of Saudi Arabia, to the east and southeast by the Arabian Sea, and to the north lies the remainder of Oman with the bulk of the population. The geography of Oman ranges from the coastal region on the Arabian Sea to the mountainous region of the Jebel, an extremely rugged region adjacent to the Yemen border in the South and southwest, and running into inhospitable desert in the north and east.<sup>1</sup> It is this mountainous area, and its inhabitants that are at the center of the British experience in Dhofar.

The situation that created the political, economic, and social conditions that gave rise to the Dhofar insurgency date back to 1932 when Sultan Said Bin Taimur assumed control of the poorly developed nation of Muscat and Oman. Never a popular leader, the Sultan's support among the people continued to decline as they saw oil revenues generated in their country making the Sultan and foreign investors wealthy while bringing absolutely no social or economic progress to the majority. The Sultan's response to the concerns of the people was largely one of repression and increasing distrust, especially of the Jebelis, the tribal Muslims living in the mountains of Dhofar.<sup>2</sup> Seeing no alternative and acting against the dictates of the Sultan, many Dhofaris of the Jebel left Dhofar in search of education and better paying jobs.

By 1964, some of those Dhofaris who had traveled abroad returned home to demand from the Sultan the fair treatment to which they were entitled in their own country. This group of educated Jebelis formed the Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF) in 1965. At its inception, the DLF was a nationalist movement with the goal of reform within the structure of the existing

government.<sup>3</sup> Initial unrest in Dhofar "had no political base or motivation but had its roots in the social and economic ills of the region".<sup>4</sup> If the Sultan had responded to the demands of the DLF at this point, the guerrilla war that followed could possibly have been averted. But, by refusing to address the economic and social problems of the people, and, in fact, taking an even harsher approach toward the tribes of the Jebel, the Sultan contributed to the conditions which paved the way for the Marxist influence that transformed the locally focused DLF into the regionally focused, communist-backed Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PLFOAG) in 1968.<sup>5</sup>

When the DLF was transformed into the PLFOAG, it became part of a larger movement to establish Marxist regimes throughout the Gulf region. As a result, the Dhofari rebels found willing support for their efforts in Iraq, China, the Soviet Union, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in the form of training, equipment, and in the case of the PDRY, a safe operations and supply base in the border town of Hauf.<sup>6</sup>

With outside support and little effective resistance from the government forces, the rebels expanded their efforts until they controlled most of Dhofar with only some of the populated areas in the vicinity of the coastal city of Salalah remaining under government control.<sup>7</sup> By 1969, the PLFOAG had undertaken an extensive program to gain support among Dhofari tribesmen through a combination of indoctrination and terror. The tribesmen were reluctant to oppose the Marxists because the fighting was already destroying their cattle-raising livelihood, and the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) and the government seemed unwilling or unable to protect them.<sup>8</sup> Cooperation with the insurgents appeared to be their only hope.

However, despite their promises to provide education and social services, the communists faced a difficult struggle in trying to convert the traditional Jebeli tribesmen to their cause

because of their Marxist anti-religion doctrine and related efforts to force them to abandon Islam and their traditional tribal lifestyle.<sup>9</sup> "Arabs are a highly individualistic people, with keenly developed ideas about religion, morals, and the inferiority of other beings in general, and women in particular. In fact, their whole essence is diametrically opposed to the communist way of life".<sup>10</sup> This failure on the part of the Marxist leaders to understand the Jebeli tribesmen's deep commitment to their way of life, and to their religion proved to be influential in the final outcome of the conflict.

Until 1970, SAF efforts to defeat the insurgents militarily were uncoordinated and lacked direction. Simultaneously, the Sultan had no intention of enacting political and economic reform. A significant change came in 1970 when the Sultan was ousted in a coup and replaced by his son, Qaboos.<sup>11</sup> Qaboos immediately implemented a comprehensive plan to respond to the demands of the people, and win back their support through honest reform.

British involvement in Dhofar to this point had been political and military support in the form of advisers, and "seconded" officers who served with the SAF. But, even with British support, the SAF could do little more than bring the fighting to a stalemate, and there was little hope for improvement without either a change in policy or a complete change in government leadership. British involvement after the 1970 coup was constrained by the domestic political situation in Great Britain, but there were some essential assets provided to Qaboos that helped to change the direction of the war. The forces included artillery, engineer, signal and medical units and a British Army Training Team (BATT) of the Special Air Service (SAS).<sup>12</sup>

While the British military contributed to the improved efficiency of the SAF, the creation and implementation of a reform plan by the new leadership actually changed the direction of

the struggle. British advice that had been provided earlier and ignored by his father was incorporated into Qaboos' plan that addressed Oman's internal and external problems.

The first element was an offer of amnesty to all who had previously opposed the government. The purpose was to draw the Jebeli tribesmen supporting the insurgents away from them by offering money, and the promise to replace the war zones with villages containing hospitals, schools, and homes.<sup>13</sup> The amnesty plan was the first step in the larger process of separating the people from the rebels. The next step was to organize the former guerrillas into a local militia group called a Firqat. The role of the Firqat was to return to rebel held areas and fight the insurgents on their own territory, employing their own tactics. Initially, there were some organizational problems when Firqat members were assigned to groups without regard to their tribal affiliation, but once that was resolved, the Firqat became a clear instrument of the government working for the people.<sup>14</sup>

The second element of Qaboos' policy was directed at the national and international political situations. The first step was to unify the country by making Dhofar the official southern province of Oman. This would help the people develop a sense of belonging to a nation, and not just to a tribe. Simultaneously, he succeeded in having Oman recognized as an Arab state, and gained the support of neighboring Arab states in preventing the PDRY from continuing their support of the insurgents.<sup>15</sup>

The third, and perhaps most important element of the reform plan was the nationwide program of development with emphasis on Dhofar. The program was designed to have both immediate and long-term effects to turn the people away from the insurgents and back to the government. The immediate plans focused on providing medical care for the Jebeli people and veterinary services for their cattle, the main source of their livelihood.<sup>16</sup> The long-term plan

was for Civil Action Teams (CATs) to build in several areas a "centre" that would provide services and form the nucleus of a village that the people would have the ability and the incentive to protect from communist infiltration. At the outset, much of the building and the protection was performed by military forces.<sup>17</sup>

The fourth element of Qaboos' plan was a more aggressive approach to military action against the rebels. The primary focus was on limiting resupply from and the use of bases in the PDRY. This required the SAF to change its mode of operation. Prior to 1971, the SAF operated in the mountains against the insurgents during favorable weather, but in monsoon season, July through September, they would pull back to less exposed bases to wait out the rain and fog. However, the rebels were mostly Jebeli tribesmen by birth and did not have the same reservations about operating in the mountains during the monsoon. Actually, they found it to be the best time of the year to move supplies from the PDRY in preparation for the upcoming campaign season against the SAF because their work was unopposed. Qaboos, with encouragement and assistance from his British military advisers, established SAF garrisons in the mountains from which the SAF conducted operations against the rebels year round. This constant pressure on the rebels effected their ability to resupply, and improved the effectiveness and morale of the SAF.<sup>18</sup>

With their source of supply from the PDRY severely scaled back by SAF operations, the rebels sought assistance from Libya, Cuba, and the Soviet Union, but the tide had begun to turn in favor of the government forces as the rebels suffered increasing numbers of casualties, and weapons losses.<sup>19</sup> By 1972, the SAF had gained the initiative, but were unsure of how to proceed against the rebels. With the help of British advisers, two objectives were established: 1) destroy insurgent forces in the east, and 2) stop the flow of supplies from the west.<sup>20</sup>

Military operations in support of these objectives combined with expanding government programs eventually led to the elimination of the rebels as an effective fighting force in 1975. "Increased prosperity and planned development was as much a factor in defeating the rebels as the military side of the war".<sup>21</sup>

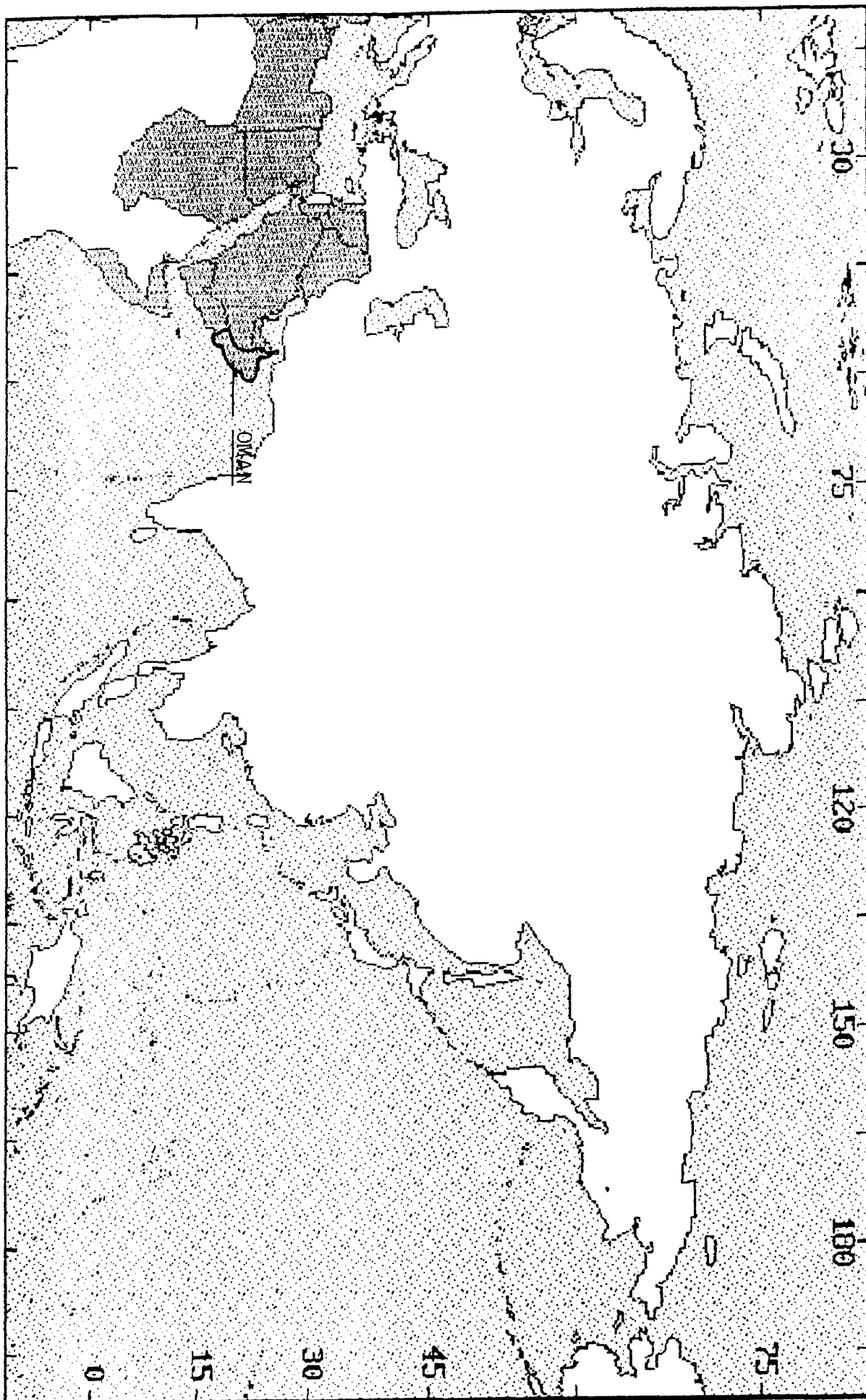
Ultimately, the defeat of the PFLOAG was brought about by two factors. The first was the genuine desire of the Qaboos government to defeat the insurgents and a willingness to enact reforms that would eliminate their support among the people of Dhofar. These reforms were essential to making the victory over the rebels a permanent one. The second factor was the support, advice, and training provided by the British Army. The optimal combination of concerned government leaders and military leaders with the experience and expertise to provide meaningful assistance made the difference.

The role of the British military in the SAF defeat of the insurgents was significant. Among the most successful aspects of the British support was the involvement of a Special Air Service (SAS) British Army Training Team (BATT). The BATT was instrumental in improving the intelligence collection effort, and provided the training for the Firqat groups that prepared them to conduct reconnaissance, ambushes, raids, and to serve as guides for regular forces.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, British officers served in positions of authority from the strategic to tactical levels through the practice of "seconding" British to Omani officers in key positions. In fact, British officers were often the primary leaders with Omani officers serving as advisers on matters such as culture and geography.<sup>23</sup> However, the practice of seconding officers was a long-standing one that had not been sufficient to defeat the insurgents until a responsive government and improved military training was added to the equation

The experience of the British Army in Dhofar contributed to the refinement of several doctrinal principles that may apply to other counterinsurgencies. First, the solution cannot be strictly a military one, but rather it must be political also, and in the final analysis, the political aspect will make the lasting contribution. Second, the solution requires complete civil-military cooperation and unity of effort. Third, a sound and fully coordinated intelligence plan must be the foundation of all military efforts. The fourth principle is to separate the insurgents from the people, and the fifth is to employ appropriate military tactics, and the two go hand in hand. Military force is required to separate the insurgents from their base of support among the people, but the inappropriate application of force may be ineffective at best, and at worst, may alienate the people from the government by doing as much damage and harm to them as is inflicted on the insurgents. The last principle, implementing long-term reform, coincides with the first as the means of permanently eliminating the insurgents through political, social, and economic reform.<sup>24</sup> These principles of counterinsurgency have been employed by the British Army in providing assistance to other countries dealing with an insurgency, and their experience in Dhofar substantiates their effectiveness.

THE MIDDLE EAST





## OMAN

Population

1.3 Million

Area (sq km)

212,460

## City Population

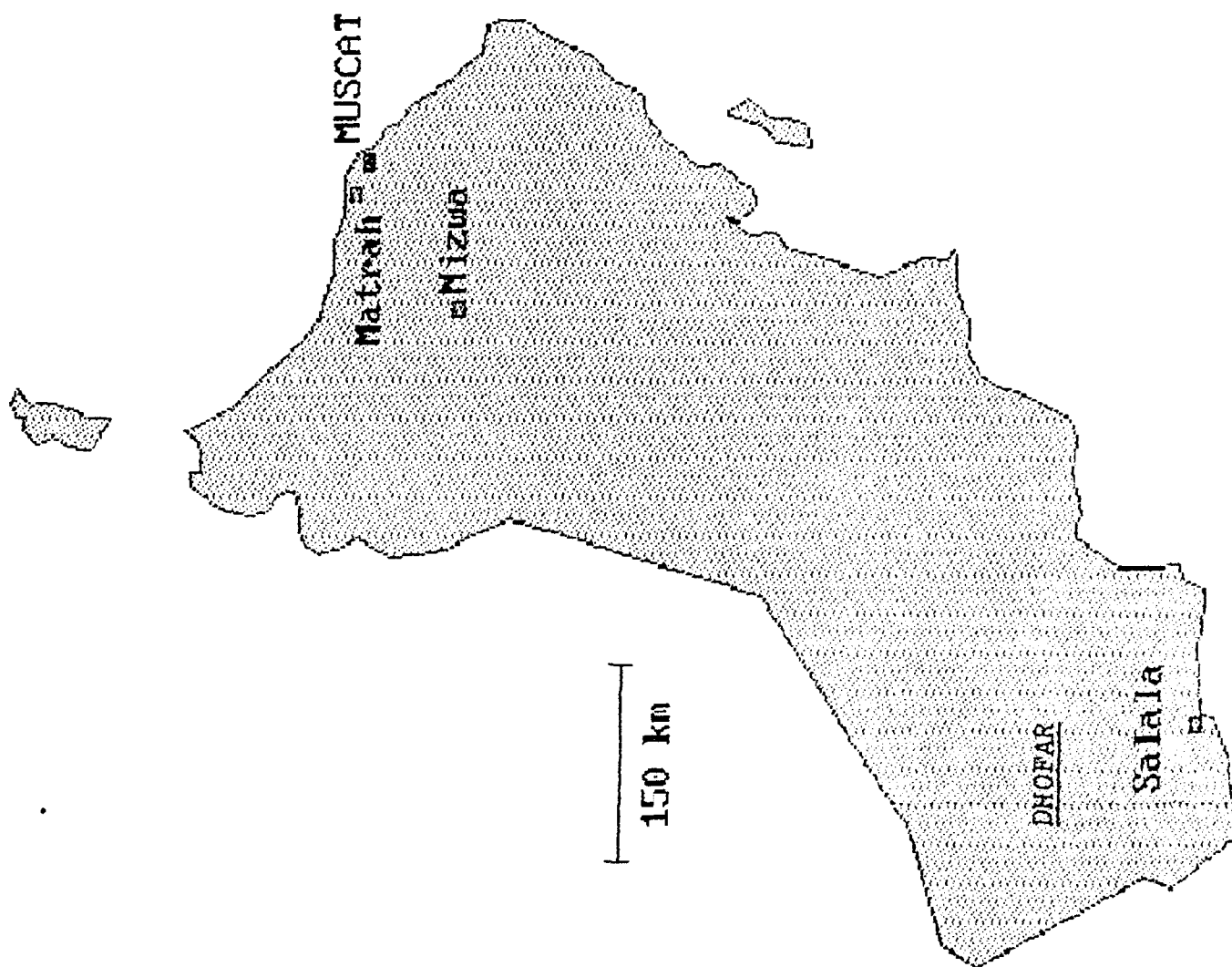
Over 1,000,000

Over 500,000

Over 100,000

Under 100,000

Capital



### CHAPTER III: EL SALVADOR

The insurgency in El Salvador is a function of social and economic problems that date back to the nineteenth century when the struggle for arable land created a class of ruling landowners and a class of subjugated peasants who worked the land. Until the early to mid-twentieth century, the landowners were concerned almost exclusively with their own economic well-being, and had little concern for the relative poverty of the campesinos. The campesinos, with no economic or political power, had no means of redress for their grievances.<sup>1</sup>

The tense situation began to deteriorate in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, and led to an inevitable confrontation between the two groups. During this period, the international economy was in a significant downward trend, and the landowners felt the effects of declining prices for their products. Also during this time, the workers began to respond to efforts at organization, and when the situation turned violent in January of 1932, civilians, military personnel and campesinos were killed. Following the Matanza (massacre), which lives in infamy in the minds of Salvadorans still, one of the labor leaders who was later to give his name to the struggle of the landless class, Augustin Farabundo Marti, was executed.<sup>2</sup>

The government grudgingly undertook some extremely limited reforms after the Matanza but the result was very little improvement for a very small percentage of campesinos. The most significant result was the response of the military and the oligarchy against the campesinos. The ability and desire of the workers to organize brought the military and the oligarchy to the conclusion that only by their cooperative efforts and mutual support would

they be able to maintain control. For the next twenty years, the repressive rule of the oligarchy with the reinforcement of the military went unchallenged.<sup>3</sup>

The changes that took place in El Salvador in the decade of the fifties brought some improvement to the country in terms of the infrastructure, but there was still no substantive progress for the workers. Foreign investment increased, but the benefits accrued mostly to the investors because the industries were largely capital intensive, as opposed to labor intensive, and so the investment failed to create a significant number of new jobs. The national economy did not improve appreciably because the peasants continued working the land and not generating the income to participate in the expanding economy. At the same time, the oligarchy refused to accept the only real solution - land reform and economic redistribution.<sup>4</sup>

On the political scene, there was some effort to develop a party that was to the right of the communist-backed workers' groups, and to the left of the military-backed oligarchy. This was the beginning of the Christian Democratic Party, and it met with marginal success in its early days. However, the struggle for political power between the ardent anti-Communists and the reform-minded Christian Democrats did little to solve the problems of the people, and the strength of the communist insurgency continued to grow.<sup>5</sup>

In the national election of 1972, the Christian Democratic candidate, Jose Napoleon Duarte, appeared to be winning over the intended winner of the ruling elite, Colonel Molina. The military and the landowners were unwilling to allow Duarte to win, and the election was stopped when it became clear that Molina did not have the necessary votes. Other members of the military interested in reform attempted to form a revolutionary junta, and keep some sense of moderation in the government, but their attempts failed. A Christian Democratic victory was averted, Duarte was exiled, and opposition met only repression.<sup>6</sup>

With an increasing loss of faith in the democratic process as the solution to their problems, the campesinos, labor union members, and students resorted to violence to bring attention to their demands and to express the seriousness of their intent. The response from the government was further repression, more violence, and the spread of right wing death squads. Violence perpetrated by the forces of the left and the right continued throughout the seventies as did the subversion of the electoral process.

During this period, various insurgent groups were acting independently throughout the country, and toward the late seventies, they began to consolidate their efforts. In 1980, the groups joined together to form political and military wings that together would control insurgent operations. The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), the military wing, and the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), the political wing, would cooperate under the controlling Unified Revolutionary Directorate (DRU). The stated aims of the DRU were the overthrow of the Salvadoran government, and the expulsion of the "Yankees".<sup>7</sup>

In 1980 while the guerrillas were getting organized, the left and right-leaning factions of the government were served with a fait accompli by a military coup that returned Duarte from exile, and invested ruling power in a junta of civilian and military authorities. Three things were accomplished with the establishment of the junta: 1) the backing of at least part of the military was assured by the presence of military members in the junta; 2) planning for socioeconomic reform and land redistribution began, and 3) national assembly and presidential elections were scheduled.<sup>8</sup>

In January of 1981, the insurgents launched their self-proclaimed "final offensive", in the belief that their own strength combined with the period of transition in the White House made the timing right. But their assumptions that they were strong enough to launch an urban attack,

and that the outgoing Carter administration would not act to resume suspended military aid to El Salvador were both wrong. The guerrillas were beaten in the cities, and the Carter administration immediately increased the amount of non-lethal aid, resumed military aid, and began sending advisers and equipment to assist the Salvadoran military.<sup>9</sup>

The loss to the insurgents pushed them from the cities into the rural areas of Chalatenango, Morazan, and Usulután Departments where they were able to consolidate their positions and bring the war to a stalemate. They continued their parallel efforts to undermine the government by destroying the agricultural capacity and infrastructure of the nation. This destruction of resources combined with acts of violence directed at people who refused to cooperate did not endear the insurgents to the people, but the government failed to offer alternatives so the people had no choice but to cooperate with the guerrillas for survival.<sup>10</sup> The FMLN was willing to accept that this was to become a prolonged struggle of insignificant gains for both sides, and so the government forces and the insurgents continued the fight.

The role of the US military in El Salvador's counterinsurgency effort increased after the guerrillas' failed final offensive. In addition to the resumption of military aid suspended over suspected government involvement in atrocities, US military forces undertook a more active role. In September of 1981, a study of the military situation in El Salvador identified problems in the Salvadoran armed forces that could be ameliorated by US assistance. The primary focus was on developing a higher level of "military competence and professionalism in a counterinsurgency environment", and the plan was implemented by the US Military Group in El Salvador.<sup>11</sup> By this time, the insurgents were receiving aid from Nicaragua and Cuba, and it was clear that the Salvadoran military needed help in countering the threat.<sup>12</sup>

Military training by US forces and military equipment from the US government were one part of the solution. The other part of the solution, the political part, was the Salvadoran National Campaign Plan that was created with the assistance of the US Military Group.

The National Campaign Plan had four basic tenets: 1) agrarian reform; 2) increased employment; 3) restoration of vital services, and 4) humanitarian assistance.<sup>13</sup> The Plan was put into action in 1982 and 83, and at the same time, the performance of the Salvadoran military began to improve with the help of US training.

Initially, the Salvadoran military forces were not organized or trained for the counter-insurgency mission. They undertook conventional operations that did little to stop the expansion of the guerrillas and were almost ineffective at preventing their destruction of the economic infrastructure. The role of the military in support of the National Campaign Plan focused on three objectives: 1) design a viable counterinsurgency force; 2) safeguard the economic infrastructure, and 3) build a positive image of the government among the people.<sup>14</sup>

Assistance by the US military to achieve the first objective of building a viable counterinsurgency force was primarily in the form of training designed to adapt existing organizations to the new strategy. Training at the unit level was conducted for Salvadoran Immediate Action Battalions, and the training emphasized small unit tactics in preparation for deployment initially in two departments where large concentrations of guerrillas were operating.<sup>15</sup> The Salvadoran armed forces had previously attempted to defeat the insurgents by conducting large unit operations in one area, and it was a simple matter for the guerrillas to avoid direct contact with them. Training of Salvadoran Army units in patrolling techniques and of Salvadoran Naval units in coastline protection was valuable in improving their ability to monitor guerrilla activities and to limit their resupply capability. The majority of the training

was conducted by US special operations forces, specifically Army Special Forces teams and Navy SEAL teams.<sup>16</sup>

The training succeeded in increasing military effectiveness, but the efforts of special operations forces as well as those of Operations and Training Teams (OPATTs) provided by the Military Group could not compensate for a weakness in Civil Defense. This weakness undermined the efforts to achieve the second objective of the National Campaign Plan, safeguarding the economic infrastructure. Salvadoran forces were spread too thin to offer protection from the guerrillas in all areas, and efforts at organizing local Civil Defense forces did not meet expectations. As a result, the guerrillas were able to continue their destruction of the economy and caused a number of programs to be abandoned.<sup>17</sup> Left unchecked, the inability of the Salvadoran military to protect the people and government programs from the destructive efforts of the insurgents, the National Campaign Plan was destined to be only marginally successful.

The government was accomplishing its third objective of improving its image among the people by the visibility of its efforts to defeat the insurgents. But, the failure of the government to organize, train, and equip Civil Defense forces adequately undermined the development programs, and indicated a mutual lack of confidence between the government and the people. "The military tended to distrust the villagers who were to form the patrols, so they were poorly, organized, often unarmed, and poorly trained."<sup>18</sup>

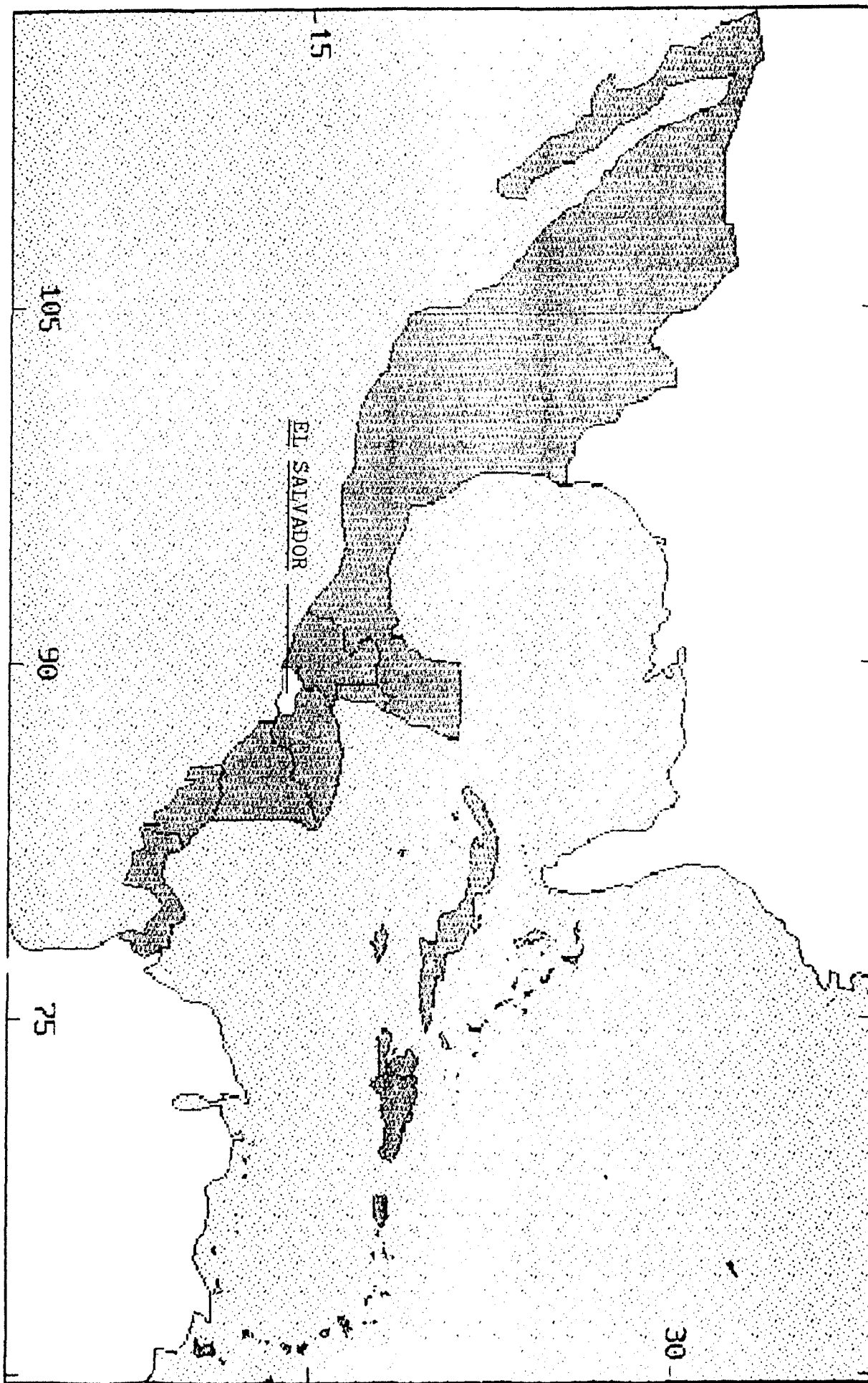
By the mid-eighties, the war was stalemated. The Salvadoran forces continued to improve their counterinsurgency operations, and the insurgents responded by changing their tactics. When the insurgents lacked sufficient power to conduct large unit operations, they resorted to

small raids. The Salvadoran military was able to prevent their consolidation of strength, but was unable to keep them from their campaign of destruction throughout the country.<sup>19</sup>

Negotiations to bring the insurgents into the political process began in 1984, but the willingness of the participants to cooperate fluctuated with the military situation in the field. Neither side was willing to compromise when they felt they had a chance for a decisive military victory. Considerable progress has been made, and the progress continues to date, but El Salvador is still waiting for a lasting peace.



CENTRAL AMERICA



# EL SALVADOR

Population

5.1 Million

Area (sq km)

21,041

City Population

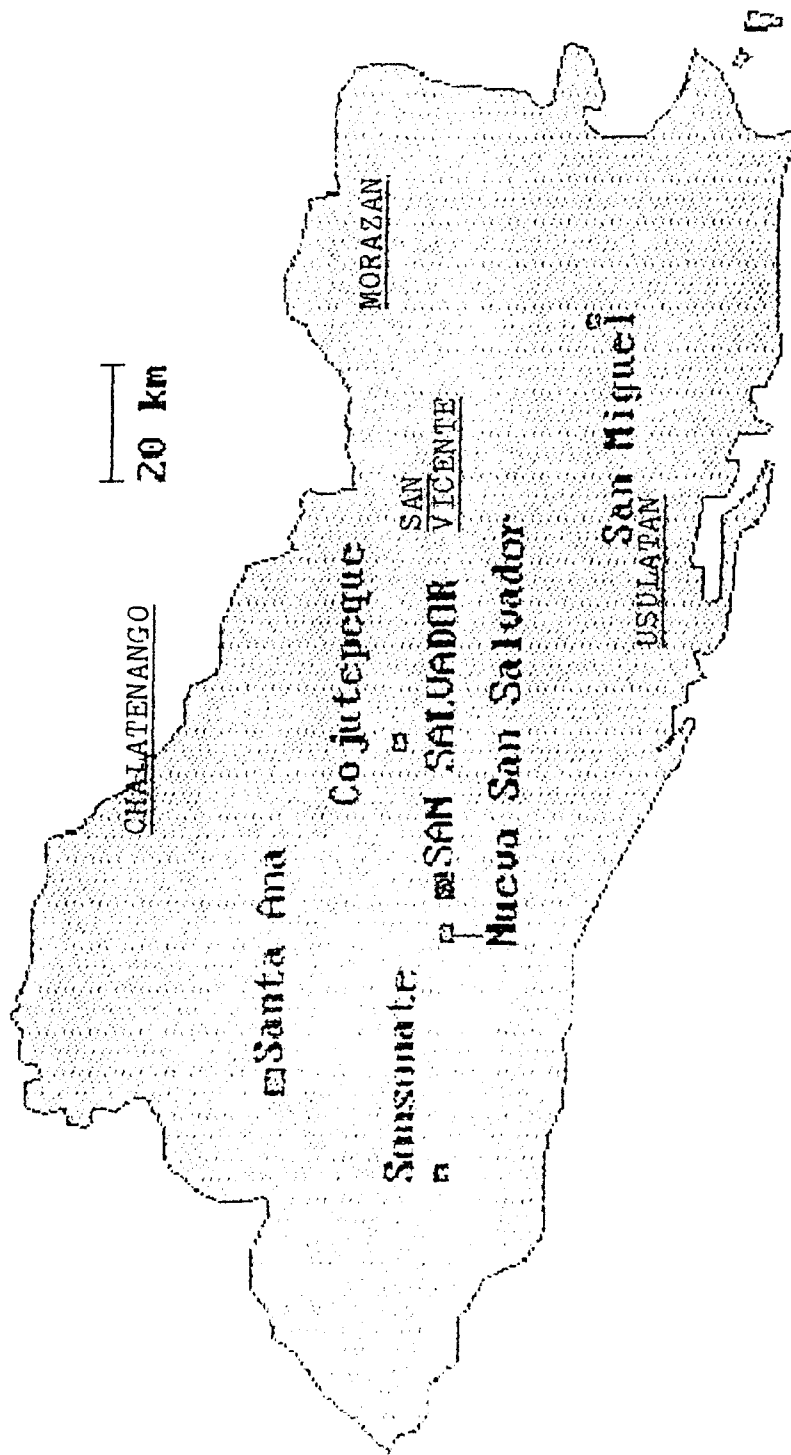
Over 1,000,000

Over 500,000

Over 100,000

Under 100,000

Capital



## **CHAPTER IV: THE ROLE OF THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER**

The two previous chapters have examined the general course of events in two nations' struggles to overcome an insurgency, and the assistance provided by the government and military forces of another nation with interests in the cause of peace and stability in the region. In both cases, some degree of success against the insurgents was achieved, but not every undertaking was successful. From the experiences of the British forces in Dhofar and the US forces in El Salvador, some common lessons can be learned despite the obvious geographical and cultural differences between the two countries facing the insurgency.

Counterinsurgency is a potential mission for an operational commander in any theater of operations. It is therefore useful to look at what has gone right and wrong in previous experiences to increase the chances for success in the next confrontation. It is also important to consider counterinsurgency operations from the tactical, operational, and strategic levels because, just as in any other type of military operation, all three levels must be fully coordinated and effectively tied together, and it is difficult to consider the operational level apart from the other two.

One of the key roles of the operational commander is to link the tactical and strategic levels together. At first glance, a counterinsurgency operation may not appear to have a definitive operational level. Counterinsurgency from the US perspective could be perceived as primarily special operations forces training the supported nation's military at the tactical level in support of our national policy to promote democracy and stability in a given nation. What, then, is the role of the operational commander? In fact, the role of the operational commander in counterinsurgency

is precisely what it is in all military operations - to relate the national strategic objectives to be achieved by military means to the tactical level. Without the operational commander as the conduit connecting the strategic and tactical levels, the essential capacity to communicate and maintain coherency between the national command authority and forces in contact with the enemy is lost.

While the responsibility of the operational commander to link the tactical and strategic levels is the same in counterinsurgency as in any other conflict, the execution of that responsibility is likely to be significantly different from the conventional conflicts that most immediately come to mind as the purview of the operational commander. Consequently, the doctrine, procedures, and even personal habits developed from experience must be reevaluated to judge their applicability. The operational commander may also face some institutional and organizational biases to which he will have to adjust. As one author put it, "...for both doctrinal and organizational reasons countering revolutionary warfare goes deeply against the grain of the US military."<sup>1</sup> The insurgencies in Dhofar and El Salvador provide examples of procedures and techniques that proved effective in the past and may be useful to the operational commander to consider in his planning for counterinsurgency in the future.

The first step in examining two counterinsurgency operations for similarities from which to learn is to recognize and internalize the fact that there are differences. Every conflict has unique characteristics, and that is particularly true of counterinsurgency operations. At the strategic level, the causes of the insurgency, the response of the aggrieved segment of society, and possibly even the alternatives to which that segment turns may all have striking similarities. But at the operational level, similarities can be nothing more than coincidence and must be considered with caution to avoid the risk of being blinded by preconceived notions.

In Dhofar and El Salvador, the lessons to be learned for the operational commander can be grouped into three categories: military, political and cultural. One of these areas may take primacy over the other two at various points throughout the campaign, but careful consideration must be given to all three at all times. However, there will always be a first among equals in these three categories, and that is the political aspect. An insurgency has its roots in the internal political problems of a nation, not in an issue of national sovereignty.<sup>2</sup> The insurgents may receive support from an external source, but the heart and soul of the problem is the internal threat, and it is essential to treat the problem, not the symptoms. Because the root cause of the problem is essentially political, the long term solution must also be political.

In terms of sequencing, the military requirements of the counterinsurgency may precede the political measures in order to respond to the military activity of the insurgents, but the cultural aspect is timeless, and must be taken into consideration from start to finish. The cultural dimension is so important because it is the people against which the military and political activities of both the insurgents and the counterinsurgents are targeted. "The center of an insurgency's strength and the key to its survival and growth is the covert political infrastructure deeply embedded in and permeating the general population...At the same time, the besieged government's power also ultimately depends upon the support and loyalty of the general population."<sup>3</sup> In essence, the center of gravity in a counterinsurgency operation is the people.

The support of the people is dependent on an understanding of their culture in order to develop and implement a solution that does not threaten their identity, values, and way of life. The operational commander is a key player in this aspect because he is close enough to the tactical situation to appreciate the cultural dynamics, and, at the same time, he is connected to the policy-makers so that those dynamics can be factored into the planning process.

In Dhofar, the cultural dimension created by the lifestyle of the Jebeli tribesman was a factor that could not be overlooked. The people lived as members of tribes in the mountains, raising their cattle, and putting their faith in Islam. To them, if a proposed solution to their economic problems or to the insurgency problem threatened their lifestyle, it was unacceptable. The actions of both the insurgents and the SAF/British forces demonstrated the criticality of this cultural dimension.

When the Dhofar reform movement fell under communist influence, key leaders received training and indoctrination outside of Oman. Part of the indoctrination was the Marxist denunciation of religion, and efforts by these externally trained leaders to spread that philosophy were not well received by the people. The Jebeli tribesman had no interest in abandoning his religious beliefs for any reason. The movement leaders resorted to violence to force their compliance, but atrocities seldom win heartfelt support, and actually made the people more amenable to the government programs that were subsequently offered.<sup>4</sup> The insurgents failed to give adequate consideration to the cultural implications of this aspect of the conflict. The operational commander and his subordinate commanders must always be looking for vulnerabilities in the tactics of the insurgents such as this one in order to exploit the weakness.

The government forces with the assistance of British special operations forces also made a mistake in underestimating the importance of the tribal structure to the Jebelis. When the BATT first began organizing the Firqat of former insurgents who had agreed to support the government forces, the British soldiers did not consider the tribal links of those individuals. The result was that the Firqat was initially less effective than had been anticipated, and the British found that when they organized the Firqat with tribal organization in mind, the results were much better.<sup>5</sup> Close monitoring of the effectiveness of their operations gave the British leadership the ability to recognize problem areas and adjustments to overcome them.

In El Salvador, cultural factors were both a cause and a component of the conflict. The willingness of the people on both sides to resort to violence may have been a result of the fact that violence is commonplace in their lives. The possession of a hand gun, and its use to settle a dispute is not an unusual occurrence.<sup>6</sup> This penchant for violence may also be part of the reason that the Salvadoran military was initially more interested in killing the insurgents than in correcting the conditions that allowed them to gain a foothold among the people. Evidence of the problem exists today in getting all members of the FMLN to lay down their weapons.

The influence of religion on the people of El Salvador was a significant factor in a similar manner as in Dhofar. "The Catholic church plays an important and influential role in El Salvador. Religion shapes the lives of the majority of the Salvadorans, who express their religious feelings through some kind of affiliation to the Church."<sup>7</sup> In part because of the people's ties to it, the Catholic Church became very involved in the conflict. Whether the influence of the Church in the conflict was good or bad is a matter of perspective, but it was a force that could not be ignored.

The lesson learned from the experience of the insurgents and the government forces about the cultural dimension cannot be overlooked. The genuine, freely-given support of the people must be the basis of a plan in order for it to work. The cultural dimension can appear insignificant in the face of more threatening issues, but it can be the weak link if not fully considered. It will be the job of the operational commander to monitor the tactical situation to make sure that it is always in the minds of the forces on the ground, and to sensitize them to an awareness of potential problems. At the same time, he must ensure through his advice and input to the strategic level that all policy matters are considered within the context of the cultural dimension.

The operational commander will be most directly involved in the military aspect of the counterinsurgency operation. His role essentially will be to apply the appropriate forces and

equipment in the appropriate manner to defeat the insurgents. It is critical, however, that the operational commander never lose sight of the fact that defeating the insurgents is one step in the process to the ultimate goal of establishing stability. There are several missions that can be accomplished by military forces, and the actual destruction of the insurgents is only one.

The first step is to determine what the correct force structure should be in terms of numbers of personnel and types of equipment. To some extent, depending on the situation, personnel and equipment will be influenced by domestic political constraints in both the supporting and the supported countries. In the case of Dhofar and El Salvador, domestic political constraints in Great Britain and the United States were one of the main reasons for limits on the force structure. For the British, the long period of involvement in the Middle East was in a state of transition, and there was little support for large numbers of forces in Oman. In the case of the US in El Salvador, the maximum number of military personnel authorized in country at any given time was fifty five.<sup>8</sup> In both cases, the senior military leaders in country identified the critical tasks to be accomplished, and determined the optimal use of available resources to reach the goal. In a period of shrinking budgets and declining force levels, similar restrictions will apply in future operations, and the operational commander will be faced with the same requirement to prioritize tasks for accomplishment with limited resources. An essential part of that task may be to inform military and civilian leaders at the strategic level that the strategic objectives as stated cannot be achieved with the resources provided, and that the objectives or the resources will have to be adjusted.

Not surprisingly, in both cases the decision was made to employ special operations forces to train the armed forces of the supported country, and in both cases, this approach was relatively successful. The Salvadoran military had been trained and equipped for a conventional conflict, and their tactics did not work against the insurgents. Similarly, initial operations undertaken by the



SAF were not making significant progress against the Dhofar rebels. But with the training and assistance provided by the US and British forces respectively, both became more effective. The key point is that in both cases, assistance was provided to the supported nation to enable them to fight their own war rather than an attempt to fight it for them. In neither case were actual combat forces provided. US experience in Vietnam demonstrates the futility of employing conventional US combat forces in an insurgent situation, and it is unlikely that the people or national policy-makers will forget that experience in the near future. Furthermore, as quoted previously from JCS Pub 3-07, part of the objective of counterinsurgent operations is to "minimize the likelihood for need of US combat involvement."<sup>9</sup>

The role of the operational commander in future insurgencies will be to most effectively use the limited number of forces available to him. Special operations forces will undoubtedly be among them due to their unique capabilities, and ability to train forces in counterinsurgency techniques. It is possible that conventional forces could be used to augment special operations forces, and in that event, care must be taken to ensure that they fully understand their mission and their applicability in counterinsurgency. Neglect in this area could result in discouragement among these forces because they are not engaged in what they understand to be their primary function, and that could lead to an overall decrease in their effectiveness.

In addition to their mission of training conventional forces in counterinsurgency tactics, special purpose forces personnel skilled in civil affairs and psychological operations should also be included in the force structure. The British used psychological operations very effectively in response to similar attempts by the insurgents to gain the support of the people. In El Salvador, psychological operations were used extensively to appeal to the insurgents to defect. One innovative and successful technique was to build a campaign using various media means around a

prominent guerrilla leader who had defected.<sup>10</sup> The former guerrilla leader was portrayed as a national hero in an attempt to lure others away from the insurgents, and to build their confidence in the treatment that they would receive upon their surrender to the government.

Civil affairs personnel can work with the host nation military as trainers in the area of civic action and community defense and development. While the supported military forces are gaining expertise in civic action programs, this approach also serves to reinforce the idea that military operations are merely one part of a larger effort to make fundamental changes in the country for the benefit of the people, and that the military supports the entire effort.

In Dhofar and El Salvador, insurgent forces were limited to conducting ground operations, and their use of air and naval forces was primarily resupply from external sources. But the fact that the enemy is primarily a ground force does not limit the operational commander to the use of ground forces in the counterinsurgency effort. Counterinsurgency can and should be a joint operation that employs a variety of assets available to the CINC. For example, in El Salvador, Air Force pilots were trained by US pilots to improved their ability to provide close air support to ground units. Additionally, if resupply of the insurgents is being conducted by sea and air, host nation naval and air forces trained by US forces could be the most appropriate assets to stem the flow of supplies.

However, the operational commander must take great care to ensure that he does not step across the line that separates training to improve supported nation capabilities and the use of US forces and equipment to compensate for capabilities that the host nation does not possess. Crossing that line could lead to a level of US forces involvement that is unacceptable for military or political reasons. Again, this highlights the essential task of the operational commander to carefully select the right types and numbers of US assets that will be employed, and to assist

leaders at both the tactical and strategic levels in keeping focused on the mission of US forces involved in the counterinsurgency operation.

The right type and amount of equipment is as important a factor as is the personnel. Much of the decision-making about the equipment provided is made at the strategic level, but it has great significance at the operational and tactical levels. Because of this, the operational commander may be required to extend himself into that strategic arena to ensure that the decision-makers fully understand the situation at the lower levels, and the impact of the equipment that they are proposing to provide. The case of aircraft in El Salvador is illustrative.

US aircraft provided to the Salvadoran armed forces increased their fire power against the insurgents, but the very nature of the insurgency meant that, at times, the effects of the bombing were felt as much by the civilians as by the rebels. The risk of civilian casualties calls into question the appropriateness and benefit of the bombing campaign when civilians and belligerents are intermixed as they are likely to be in a rural insurgent situation. Eventually, fewer bombing missions due to a shortage of trained pilots, and improved accuracy of the bombing as a result of US Air Force training reduced the number of civilian casualties.<sup>11</sup> Equipment provided without adequate training can do more harm than good.

A secondary benefit of de-emphasizing attacks by air was to put emphasis back onto the ground operations where the military was forced to go out among the population to find and defeat the insurgents.<sup>12</sup> This presence of the government forces can have a significant impact on the attitude of the people who have gotten used to seeing the insurgents among them, and from that may conclude that they are their only alternative for change.

In Dhofar, the British provided small arms, artillery for increased fire power, and vehicles to make the SAF a more mobile force. The weapons were used successfully against the rebels while

minimizing civilian casualties. Aircraft were used primarily for resupply and transport of ground forces, especially for the permanent garrisons that proved effective in isolating the rebels in the Jebel from their source of supply in the PDRY.

In counterinsurgency, as in any operation, intelligence is a key ingredient. However, collection means and assistance in the process must be tailored to the intelligence source. There is a potential disparity between support from high technology collection means and low technology sources. The insurgents may be susceptible to a limited amount of signals intelligence collection that can be conducted most effectively by host nation forces who do not face a language barrier, and analytical assistance can be provided by US forces. Imagery intelligence from US assets may be useful in database development. The primary source, however, is likely to be human intelligence, and the operational commander must be prepared to exploit two main sources - the civilian population in areas where the insurgents are active, and the insurgents themselves.

In order to collect information from the people, the operational commander will have to work closely with the host nation government and military forces to create an environment in which the people are confident that they will not suffer reprisals at the hands of the insurgents. The people must also be confident that they will not be mistreated by government forces. The operational commander can have an impact on this complicated process through US military personnel working with host nation military personnel, constantly emphasizing that the people must be protected from the insurgents, and that human rights violations only make their jobs more difficult in the long run. This kind of effort was especially important in El Salvador. The operational commander can also work with other members of the Country Team and the host nation government to develop a protection program for particularly valuable sources of information.

In Dhofar and in El Salvador, a means of getting intelligence from the insurgents that worked well was an amnesty program. In the case of Dhofar, the British were able to use the insurgents who participated in the program to provide intelligence on the inner workings of the insurgent organization and then incorporate those same individuals into the Firqat to assist the SAF in their military operations. The amnesty program in El Salvador suffered from a lack of financial support, but the program was nonetheless a valuable one, and worth considering in developing an intelligence collection plan.

Members of the diplomatic community will probably take the lead in dealing with US concerns in the political dimension of the counterinsurgency operation, but the operational commander will work closely with US and host nation political leaders. In future operations, it is likely that he will share responsibilities with members of the Country Team and representatives of other US and international agencies involved in providing and managing assistance programs. While the political and military aspects of the operation have distinct missions and objectives in support of the national goals, that distinction tends to blur in certain areas, and among those are command and control, and operational planning.

Obviously, the need for assistance in the supported nation is real, and is recognized by all concerned when that assistance is requested and received. But that does not necessarily mean that all involved will agree on the detailed implementation of the assistance program. The operational commander will have to execute his responsibilities in conjunction with other key players, both US and supported nation. In El Salvador, a good working relationship between senior State Department representatives and senior military members stands as an example of how well that situation can be managed to the benefit of the mission. Both senior State Department and military representatives also need to establish a relationship based on mutual respect and in the spirit of a

common goal with their counterparts in the host nation. Friction in either of these relationships can complicate the job of the operational commander, and can impact on overall effectiveness.

The British in Dhofar were spared some of the potential difficulty of making the best choices for the use of military forces because they practically occupied all the key leadership positions in the SAF, and the Omani officers worked for them. This practice of seconding was based on an old tradition that was typical of British military operations in the region and it was equally successful in Dhofar. This relationship with the Omani military forces also gave the senior British military leaders access to the Omani political leadership as another means of resolving any differences. However, that type of system may not be easily adaptable to another situation, and probably would not have worked in El Salvador because of the sensitivity of the Salvadorans to losing control in their own country. For example, in developing the National Campaign Plan to organize and coordinate the counterinsurgency effort, the Salvadorans accepted advice from US advisers, but were reluctant to accept the US plan outright. While the final version of the plan did reflect heavy US influence, the Salvadorans felt ownership of it because they had sufficient input to the final version.<sup>13</sup> In all aspects of the counterinsurgency operation, the host nation government must control the direction to ensure that no one loses sight of the ultimate goal, and that the solution to the insurgency problem is one that will stand the test of time. A plan such as the National Campaign Plan is essential in maintaining that control. Qaboos' plan for reform served the same purpose in Dhofar. However, if the plan is not supported wholeheartedly by the key political and military leaders in the country, its chances for success can be diminished. In El Salvador, the military did not have complete trust in the people and so refused to train and equip the Civil Defense forces for them to adequately perform their mission. Consequently, the plan did not meet its potential for improving social and economic conditions in El Salvador.

In both Dhofar and El Salvador, it is obvious that the right combination of military assistance and political leadership dedicated to solving the problem must go hand in hand to defeat an insurgency. One without the other is insufficient, and at best, can only meet short-term objectives while the more serious long-term problem continues to fester.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS

After examining the counterinsurgency efforts in Dhofar and El Salvador, one might logically conclude that they do provide guidance for the operational commander in future counterinsurgency operations. The two cases can assist in the process of organizing, planning and planning executing the mission by emphasizing the cultural, military and political actions in which the operational commander will play a significant role.

First and always, the operational commander will consider the cultural aspect. No action, political or military can be divorced from it. More than in conventional conflict, the culture of the people is inextricably linked to the operation. Physically, part of the problem is separating the people from the belligerents but the belligerents are not an invading force from another nation. Rather, the belligerents are an internal force, and while they may have external support, they are part of the same culture that the fighting is attempting to preserve.

The cultural dimension is an enormous one with countless aspects. It is impossible to list all the potential situations that the operational commander could face, so an accurate and thorough evaluation of the situation on the ground is critical. Only by doing so can he obtain a real appreciation for the factors at work. The operational commander is the key player in this process because of his unique position in contact and coordination with the tactical and strategic levels.

The operational commander will have the responsibility of implementing the military component of the US counterinsurgency strategy. The most difficult task that he will face will be matching the assigned objectives with the means available. In counterinsurgency, more is not necessarily better, and overwhelming force is not an option that is likely to be available nor would it be effective if it was. Forces must be chosen judiciously and with specific objectives in mind



that support the objectives of the nation being assisted. Care must be taken to ensure that US capabilities brought to bear on the problem complement those of the supported nation rather than supplant them. Technologically advanced equipment can support the effort, but it must be applied with extreme caution and closely monitored to ensure that the effect that it has is the intended one.

Most importantly, the operational commander must recognize that his military role in the counterinsurgency operation is a supporting one. The most essential task will be training provided to host nation military forces so that they can do their job of supporting their government in solving its problem. For the US military, the supporting role can be a difficult one. There will be a "take charge" tendency that must be constrained. The operational commander must see himself as a member of the supporting cast. That support is absolutely essential to success, but it can not consume the job of the primary participants, the government and military forces of the host nation.

The operational commander will also play a key role in the political dimension of the counterinsurgency effort, and he will be required to work closely with US and host nation government officials. The most important and potentially the most difficult task in the political arena will be translating the military situation into terms that will be accepted and understood by both US and host nation officials. Only by making that translation understood will the operational commander be able to make honest assessments of the situation and adjustments as necessary. The effort can be complicated by differing and even contradictory ideas of what the results should be and what the best way to achieve them is. In Dhofar, the rise to power by Sultan Qaboos was a clear turning point in the political direction of the conflict. This was the essential step to the solution of the problem. In El Salvador, the process was more evolutionary and more complicated. The attitudes of key players were not quickly or decisively changed. The means to the end were not always agreed upon, and not everyone was supportive of the intricacies of the

National Campaign Plan. It is very possible that the operational commander will face similar ambiguous situations in the future.

The role of the operational commander in counterinsurgency will be a challenging one that will require innovative thinking and attitude adjustments. As in any operation, the operational level is the critical one that ties the national strategy to the individual efforts on the ground. Inappropriate action at the tactical level can undermine the strategic objective that it is intended to achieve. At the same time, if the strategy is unclear or unattainable with the resources available, tactical success will be for naught. The role of the operational commander is to maintain the ties that keep the tactical effort and the strategic goal connected.

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